

India, US close to finalising framework trade deal, says Commerce Secretary Rajesh Agrawal

UNITED STATE, DEC 15

India and the United States are “very close” to finalising the framework for their proposed bilateral trade agreement, Commerce Secretary Rajesh Agrawal said on Monday, underlining that negotiations between the two sides are progressing actively.

The two countries are engaged in parallel discussions — one focused on a framework trade deal aimed at addressing high tariffs, and the other on a comprehensive bilateral trade agreement (BTA).

The new US Deputy Trade Representative, Rick Switzer, visited India last week for trade talks with Agrawal. During the visit, both sides reviewed bilateral trade relations and assessed the progress of negotiations on the framework deal as well as the comprehensive BTA.

“We are very close on the framework deal, which we feel can be done in a short period of time. But I would not like to put a time period on that,” Agrawal told reporters here.

Responding to a query on whether more formal rounds would be held for the BTA, Agrawal said talks at the final



stage generally do not require such rounds. He noted that while there may not be a formal round, both physical and virtual meetings would take place as the negotiations approach completion.

“So, we are moving in that zone, and we are working tirelessly to see as fast as we can,” he added.

Referring to the ongoing talks with New Zealand, the commerce secretary said once “we are in a zone”, where only a few issues or areas remain to be addressed, formal rounds are no longer necessary. With New Zealand, “we are moving towards a closure”, he said, adding that discussions are taking place on a daily basis.

“Last stage (talks) are like the most difficult things where maybe the principals need to take a call at the secretary or minister level,” Agrawal pointed out. On negotiations with the European Union, he said, “We are narrowing down the differences”. “There is a set of differences on the table where we are not able to agree...we are virtually engaged...These discussions are (happening) on a regular basis,” he said.

The talks have gained urgency as the Trump administration has imposed steep 50 per cent tariffs on Indian goods entering the US market. The outcome of the negotiations is also expected to have a positive impact on the rupee, which has recently fallen

to record lows and breached the psychologically significant 90-to-a-dollar level.

Indian industry and exporters are keenly awaiting the conclusion of the negotiations and the announcement of a deal, as high import duties have adversely affected shipments to the US. While exporters are exploring alternative markets to protect margins, the US remains a crucial destination, accounting for around 18 per cent of India's total exports.

Initially, the US imposed a 25 per cent duty on Indian goods citing concerns over the trade deficit, which stood at about USD 46 billion in 2024-25. This was followed by an additional 25 per cent penalty on India for purchasing Russian crude.

India has maintained that resolving these tariffs would be central to firming up the first phase of the trade deal. Under the proposed pact, the US is seeking duty concessions on agricultural products such as almonds, corn and apples, as well as on industrial goods. India, however, has strongly opposed any concessions in the agriculture and dairy sectors, reiterating that it will not compromise the interests of farmers and MSMEs.

Ahmed al Ahmed, who tackled Bondi Beach gunman, recovering after surgery

NEW DELHI, DEC 15



A Sydney resident who wrestled a gun from one of the alleged attackers during the mass shooting at Bondi Beach is recovering in hospital after undergoing surgery for bullet wounds to his arm and hand, his family said. Forty-three-year-old Ahmed al Ahmed was identified on social media as the bystander who hid behind parked cars before charging at the gunman from behind, seizing his rifle and knocking him to the ground.

Australian police on Monday said a 50-year-old father and his 24-year-old son carried out the attack at a Jewish celebration at Bondi Beach on Sunday afternoon, killing 15 people in the country's worst mass shooting in almost 30 years.

Jozay Alkanji, cousin of Ahmed al Ahmed, speaking while he was leaving the hospital in Sydney on Monday evening said: "He's done the first surgery. I think he's got two or three surgeries, that depend on

the doctor, what he says." Tributes have poured in from leaders both abroad and at home.

U.S. President Donald Trump called Ahmed "a very, very brave person" who saved many lives. Chris Minns, the premier of New South Wales state where Sydney is located, has hailed him "a genuine hero" and said the video was "the most unbelievable scene I've ever seen".

A GoFundMe campaign has been set up for Ahmed with just over A\$200,000 (\$132,900) raised in a few hours. Billionaire hedge fund manager Bill Ackman was the largest donor, contributing A\$99,999 and sharing the fundraiser on his X account.

Outside St George Hospital in the Sydney

suburb of Kogarah where Ahmed is being treated, complete strangers came to show their support.

Misha and Veronica Pochuev came to the hospital with their seven-year-old daughter Miroslava to drop off flowers for Ahmed.

“My husband is Russian, my father is Jewish, my grandpa is Muslim. This is not only about Bondi, this is about every person,” Veronica said. Miroslava held the bouquet with a note that read “To Ahmed: for courage and saved lives”.

Yomna Touni, 43, is raising money to help Ahmed's recovery.

“He potentially saved many people yesterday, and that, for us, from an Islamic perspective, is to have saved all of mankind, you know,” Touni said.

Hong Kong media tycoon Jimmy Lai convicted under national security law

HONG KONG, DEC 15



Jimmy Lai, the pro-democracy former Hong Kong media mogul and outspoken critic of Beijing, was convicted in a landmark national security trial in the city's court on Monday, which could send him to prison for the rest of his life.

Three government-vetted judges found Lai, 78, guilty of conspiring with others to collude with foreign forces to endanger national security and conspiracy to publish seditious articles. He pleaded not guilty to all charges. Lai, 78, was arrested in August 2020 under a Beijing-imposed national security law that was implemented following massive anti-government protests in 2019. During his five years in custody, Lai has been sentenced for several lesser offenses, and appears to have grown more frail and thinner.

Among the attendees were Lai's wife and son, and Hong Kong's Roman Catholic Cardinal Joseph Zen. Lai pressed his lips and nodded to his family before being escorted out of the courtroom by guards. Lai's trial, conducted without a jury, has been closely

monitored by the U.S., Britain, the European Union and political observers as a barometer of media freedom and judicial independence in the former British colony, which returned to Chinese rule in 1997.

His verdict is also a test for Beijing's diplomatic ties. US President Donald Trump said he has raised the case with China, and UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer has said his government has made it a priority to secure the release of Lai, who is a British citizen.

The founder of the now-defunct pro-democracy newspaper Apple Daily was convicted on two counts of conspiracy to commit collusion with foreign forces to endanger national security, in addition to one count of conspiracy to distribute seditious publications.

Under Hong Kong's sweeping national security

law, the collusion charge could result in a sentence ranging from three years in jail to life imprisonment, depending on the offense's nature and his role in it. The sedition charge carries a maximum of two years' imprisonment.

A four-day mitigation hearing was set to begin Jan. 12 for Lai to argue for a shorter sentence.

The Apple Daily was a vocal critic of the Hong Kong government and the ruling Chinese Communist Party. It was forced to shut in 2021 after police raided its newsroom and arrested its senior journalists, with authorities freezing its assets.

During Lai's 156-day trial, prosecutors accused him of conspiring with senior executives of Apple Daily and others to request foreign forces to impose sanctions or blockades and engage in other hostile activities against Hong Kong or China.

'For all I know, she could be dead' says son of Myanmar's detained former leader Aung San Suu Kyi

MYANMAR, DEC 15



With her health failing and an information vacuum around Myanmar's detained former leader Aung San Suu Kyi, her son worries that he may not even know if she passed away. Kim Aris told Reuters he has not heard from his 80-year-old mother in years, and has received only sporadic, secondhand details about her heart, bone and gum problems since a 2021 military coup that deposed her government.

And while he rejects attempts by Myanmar's junta to hold elections later this month, dismissed by many foreign governments as a sham aimed at legitimising military rule, he says it could provide an opening to ease his mother's plight.

"She's got ongoing health issues. Nobody has seen her in over two years. She hasn't been allowed contact with her legal team, never mind her family," he said in an interview in Tokyo. "For all I know, she could be dead already."

"I imagine (Myanmar junta leader) Min Aung Hlaing has his own agenda when it comes to my mother. If he does want to use her to try and appease the general population before or after the elections by either releasing her or moving her to house arrest, then at least that would be something," he added.

A Myanmar junta spokesman did not respond to calls seeking

comment. Myanmar's military has a history of releasing prisoners to mark holidays or important events.

Nobel Peace Laureate Suu Kyi was freed in 2010 days after an election, ending a previous long period of detention largely spent at her colonial-style family home on Yangon's Inya Lake. She went on to become Myanmar's de-facto leader after elections in 2015, the first openly contested vote in a quarter century, though her international image was later tarnished by accusations of genocide committed against her country's Muslim Rohingya minority.

'Small window of opportunity' Myanmar has been in turmoil since the 2021 coup, which triggered an armed rebellion that has captured swathes of territory across the country.

Suu Kyi is serving a 27-year sentence for offences including incitement, corruption and

election fraud, all of which she denies.

Aris said he believes she is being held in the capital Naypyitaw, and in the last letter he received from his mother two years ago she complained about the extreme temperatures in her cell during the summer and winter months.

With conflicts erupting all over the world, Aris worries that people are forgetting about Myanmar.

He is trying to capitalise on the upcoming elections - the first since the coup which are set to be held in phases from December 28 - to get foreign governments like Japan to exert more pressure on the junta and call for his mother's release.

"Because of the upcoming elections that the military are trying to stage, which we all know are completely unfair, and so far from being free that it would be laughable if it wasn't so

lamentable, I need to use this small window of opportunity," he said.

"In the past, when my mother was held in higher regard by the international community, then it was much harder for people to ignore what's happening in Burma. But since her position was undermined through the crisis in Rakhine, that's no longer the case," he added, using the country's former name.

Aris, a British national who kept a low profile until a few years ago, maintains his mother was "not complicit" in what the United Nations called a genocidal campaign by the military against the Rohingya in Rakhine state in 2016-17. While she was de-facto leader, Myanmar's constitution limited Suu Kyi's power over the military. She admitted that war crimes may have been committed at an international tribunal in The Hague in 2020 but denied genocide.

During his trip to Japan, Aris said he met with various Japanese politicians and government officials to press them to take a stronger stand against the junta and reject the elections.

Asked what his mother would think of his efforts, he said: "I think she'd be incredibly sad that I've had to do this. She's always wanted me to not have to get involved. But I don't really have a choice at the moment. I am her son after all. And if I'm not doing it, I can't expect anybody else to do it."

Inside the Clintons' fight to avoid testifying in the house Epstein inquiry

UNITED STATE, DEC 15

A quiet, monthslong battle between Rep. James R. Comer of Kentucky, the Republican chair of the Oversight Committee, and Bill and Hillary Clinton over the panel's Jeffrey Epstein investigation could come to a head this week. Comer has threatened to begin contempt of Congress proceedings against them if they fail to appear in person for depositions.

The threat is the starkest example yet of the attempt by House Republicans to shift the focus of the Epstein affair away from President Donald Trump and his

administration and onto prominent Democrats who once associated with the convicted sex offender and his longtime companion, Ghislaine Maxwell. After Democrats on his panel effectively forced him to subpoena the Justice Department for its files, Comer also issued subpoenas in August to the Clintons, as well as to eight former top law enforcement officials. Since then, the chair has withdrawn the subpoenas for five former attorneys general who wrote in statements to the panel that they had no knowledge relevant to the investigation. The committee also excused former FBI directors James

Comey and Robert Mueller from giving live depositions. Only one person, former Attorney General Bill Barr, has appeared to testify.

But Comer has refused to excuse the Clintons, even though they have repeatedly offered to provide the same kind of sworn statement to the committee. Instead, Comer has falsely accused them of ignoring his subpoenas and continued to demand that they appear for live depositions or face the possibility of being held in contempt, typically a first step in referring someone to the Justice Department for prosecution.

For months, the Clintons have been engaging with Comer far more

than was previously known to respond to his requests and avoid having to appear on Capitol Hill. Their longtime attorney, David Kendall, has sent three letters explaining in detail his argument that the Clintons should be required only to provide sworn statements to the committee. On Sept. 30, Kendall met in person with Comer's staff to discuss the requests.

Comer, in response, has only amped up his threats to penalize the Clintons if they fail to show up in person.

“The former president and former secretary of state have delayed, obstructed and largely ignored the

committee staff's efforts to schedule their testimony,” Comer said in a statement Friday night. He again threatened to start contempt proceedings against them if they did not appear before his committee on Dec. 17 and 18, or schedule a date in early January to do so.

In a letter last week, Kendall accused Comer of going after the Clintons with “weaponized legislative investigations and targeted criminal prosecutions,” and said that it was neither appropriate or tenable for them to appear and be held to a different standard than others who had been excused.

“President Trump has consistently

sought to divert attention from his own relationship with Mr. Epstein and unfortunately the committee appears to be complicit,” Kendall wrote in the letter, one of three that were provided to The New York Times by a Democratic lawmaker and have not been previously disclosed. He said that Comer's only reason for targeting the Clintons was “to catalyze a public spectacle for partisan purposes.”

Bill Clinton was acquainted with Epstein — an association the former president described in his memoir — but never visited his private island and cut off contact with him two decades ago.